

Sleep of the Damned
by Susanne Barringer

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> Thanks to my always fabulous beta and cheerleader, Suzanne with a z.

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"Can I come in?" His voice is soft and needy as he peeks into my motel room, his hand holding the door open just slightly as if to give me privacy.

"Of course." He pushes the door the rest of the way open and steps inside, letting it fall shut behind him.

I sit up on the bed. I watch as his eyes take note of the bedspread pulled back but the blankets still tightly tucked and folded over. I wasn't sleeping, wasn't even close.

I was waiting for him.

He stands just inside the door. "How come your door wasn't locked?"

"I thought you might want to talk."

"I figured you'd tell me to get some sleep again," he says with a gently teasing voice. He takes a step forward and stands a few feet in front of me.

"I figured you wouldn't."

He nods slightly, then turns away to take a quick tour around my room. He passes by the foot of the bed, stops to look at the painting next to the mirror. Then he walks around toward the bathroom, peeks through to look at it even though I'm sure his is just the same. Out of room to wander, he returns via the same path, stopping to run his eyes over the belongings I've set out on the dresser.

He looks lost, but at this moment I know that he is as found as he's ever been. Something happened to him after he disappeared into the woods while I was questioning Arbutus Ray about Samantha. I turned around and he was gone, lured to the end of the road that he claimed we had found.

Having examined everything in the room, he returns to stand in front of me. His eyes are bright with something I could never have imagined in him. Something indescribable, that only Mulder could feel and believe. He's beautiful.

"Do you want to sit down, Mulder?" He has come here to tell me something, but I realize I must let him do it on his own time.

He nods again, then sits on the bed next to me.

I wait.

"Thank you, Scully." I turn to look at him and he is smiling at me. This isn't what he came to say.

"For what, Mulder?" The smile falls victim to a serious look.

"For coming here, for giving me the benefit of the doubt, for helping me find the truth." Despite that serious look, the bright light in his eyes hasn't faded. It's like starlight here in the dim room.

"Did we find the truth, Mulder?"

He searches my face as if the answer is written there. "I did."

I look at him, watching closely that steadfast light in his eyes that glimmers from deep within, as if there is a furnace burning inside of him.

He surprises me by suddenly lying back on the bed, his hand coming up to rub his eyes. He needs to sleep.

"It was so odd, Scully, but so right." His hand reaches out to brush mine where it is propped on the bed near his hip. I touch his leg briefly as a reply. I can't imagine what he's been through, what happened out there. Whatever it was, it's brought him something that seems like peace. He's found his closure.

He rolls over and crawls fully onto the bed, shifting so he is lying

the right direction with his head on the pillow. He turns on his side to face me, and I look over my shoulder at him. I'm surprised at the way he has suddenly made himself at home in my room, but I don't resent it. In fact, I welcome it. I love the fact that he needs me.

He reaches out and touches my arm, pulling gently. He wants me to lie down next to him. I turn around and lower my shoulder to lie on my side facing him. We lie across from each other, watching each other. This intimacy feels strange, like it belongs to someone else, to two other people who aren't us and never can be. At the same time, it's desperately needed--by both of us.

Mulder pulls his knees up closer to his chest, then reaches out to stroke my shoulder briefly. I understand what he wants--contact, touch, to be close to someone. I move forward a bit so that we are closer and pull up my knees so they touch his.

"Do you want to tell me about it, Mulder?"

He nods against the pillow but doesn't speak at first. It's as if he's collecting his thoughts, trying to find the words to explain what has put that light into his eyes, what has lifted the darkness of his soul. Whatever it is that he has come here to tell me.

"I saw her, Scully. I held her in my arms. I know that sounds crazy, but this time it was real. She touched my heart. It felt like a pinprick. Right here." He places his hand over his heart. "A pinprick," he repeats. "It was so real."

Then he reaches across and lays his hand over my heart. "You've felt it before, haven't you Scully? Right here?"

My emotions surge upward in the way that comes when tears rise, although the tears themselves are absent this time. I have felt it. I felt it when Emily came to me in Father Gregory's church, begging me to let her go. It was like a little stabbing pain in my chest, as if my heart was being pinched to remind it that it wasn't dreaming. Just like a pinprick.

"Yes," I whisper, and place my hand over his, over my heart. "Right here." He smiles at me, his eyes heavy with a lifetime of weariness, then turns his hand over to clasp mine in his.

"I saw it in your eyes, Scully." He gives me a soft grin, then unclasps our hands so he can reach up and brush at my cheeks, as if wiping away tears that haven't fallen.

"You're free now." I repeat his words from earlier, what he said to me as he stood looking up at the sky, years of grief and mourning draining away from him. I say it instead of ask it because I can see the affirmative answer in his eyes. I can see the weight that is missing, the absence of the dark pain that has been there for as long as I have known him. That brightness in his eyes which I haven't been able to place--that is freedom. That is what it looks like to be free of one's demons and nightmares, of one's darkest fear.

I wonder how long it's been since someone has seen that light in my eyes.

He understands. His hand winds its way around my shoulder, coming to rest on the back of my neck. "But you're not," he whispers. He strokes over the back of my neck, right where the implanted chip may or may not be ticking away like a time bomb toward some explosion we can't even begin to predict.

"No." In some ways, I hadn't even realized until this moment how much a prisoner I still am, how many times a day I force myself not to wonder when the next time will be that I am drawn to some place against my will or suddenly develop some incurable disease.

"We need to free you." He presses his forehead against mine, his hand continuing to caress the back of my neck. "We're not done until we're both free."

The tears come then because I can't stop them any longer. Mulder lets them fall, his face pressed against mine, his hand reminding me of the ever-present object inside of me that keeps me prisoner.

"I'm so tired, Scully." His eyes battle to stay open. Each time they sink shut they pop open again to look at me, as if he doesn't want to leave me.

"Sleep, Mulder." Just our knees and foreheads touch, and his hand on the back of my neck. We must look like a circle. "Go ahead and sleep."

He is asleep before he can even agree, his arm falling limply across my shoulder. His breathing falls quickly into the slow steady rhythm of the content, of the free.

I envy him, this contentment, this deep sleep of perfection. I will watch him as long as I can, fighting off my own sleep, wondering how much longer I am destined to be damned.

END

>
 Feedback always met with much joyous dancing. :)
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